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ABSTRACT

A number of important consequences have resulted from the generally increased sensitivity of trade unions to questions of communication and representation, particularly the trade union's uses of videos. Primarily developed by union leadership as a response to general political problems they have faced in the last decade, trade union videos constitute a large and expanding area of non-broadcast video work. These trade union officials have a precise sense of their members' needs and are prepared to experiment with different formal solutions to problems of communication. However, they also have a strong interest in controlling the content of material produced at all times. The major functions of these materials are general campaigning and training and education of members, and the distribution of materials for other uses poses severe problems. Conflicts of interest within and between union leadership and video makers have led some trade unionists to look for alternative forms of communication. Many of the avenues tried are fraught with difficulties, and forms of communication which go beyond the limits set by officials may not resolve all of the problems. Video workers who wish to be independent of the restrictions placed on them by the bureaucracy need financial help as well as organizational and political space. The appended list of sources includes 25 printed works, 22 interviews, and 20 tapes. (CGD)

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Trade Union Uses of Video

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Paper Presented to the 1986 International Television Studies Conference

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Introduction

Relations between the trade unions and the media have been the subject of much attention and controversy over the last decade or so. Amongst active trade unionists the view is widely held that the mass media are one way or another direct and unmediated servants of the employers and the state (Goodwin, 1985). Academic research has, of course, taken a rather more measured and nuanced approach, whether it has found that there is some objective basis to the charges made by trade unionists, or when it has claimed that the mass media have in fact operated according to the criteria of objective reporting. It is not the intention of this paper to rehearse these arguments or to attempt to advance that debate. Rather I want to look at one of the consequences of the generally increased sensitivity of trade unions to questions of communication and representation

The trade union movement itself has devoted a substantial amount of attention to its relations with the media. A number of books (for example MacShane,1983: Drinkwater, 1984) dealing with how to 'handle' the media are widely used in formal and informal trade union education. Courses exist, there are some at PCL for instance, which aim to familiarise trade unionists with methods of presentation (for a good summary, see Goodwin and Field, 1985). The TUC has published reports on the media (TUC,1979a, 1979b, 1980, 1981) and is currently producing a series of guides to aspects of the media for its member unions. The first of these is *Guidelines for Trade Unions on Use of Advertising* (TUC, n.d. [1985]). In his introduction, Norman Willis, General Secretary of the TUC, locates this publication as one of the results of 'a conference of union principal officers held in January 1985, to consider union communications as part of an overall review of TUC strategy'. The second of this series is currently in preparation and it deals with trade union uses of video. In this paper I want to examine some of the issues raised by this development.

Video remains an expensive medium, although its hardware costs are falling, and it is therefore important to ask why it should be the case that the

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decision has been taken to use the members' money in this way and not another. It is also an area in which the trade unions do not have a great deal of expertise and they are obliged to enter into contractual relations with production companies in order to achieve their ends. There are, as we shall see, a wide range of such companies, with different policies and aesthetic strategies. They are all, however, bound in one way or another by the economic constraints of production. There is consequently an area of tension located precisely over issues of representation which requires investigation. Finally, given that the aim of this kind of video production is to achieve results with an audience rather than gratify the vanity or aesthetic senses of its commissioners and producers, it is important to ask how far this end might be realised.

Defining the Field

The term 'trade union video' needs a certain amount of explanation. The 'video' part of the term is used in this paper to refer to a means of reproduction. There are numerous arguments amongst programme producers as to the relative merits of celluloid film and magnetic tape for programme generation. These have some importance but are not properly my current concern. Thus a tape like *Presenting the TGWU* ,produced for the TGWU by Radcomm, was in fact shot on 16mm film but its crucial difference from an earlier TGWU film on the same subject is that the current work is available on videocassette and is for sale, for £5 a copy, to all members of the TGWU. It is, as we shall see, the way in which video allows new means of circulation that forms one of the key questions about its trade union application.

The 'trade union' part of the term is rather more complex. At least since the Webbs it has been recognised that trade unions are not homogeneous bodies. According to the founding Fabians, the development of stable trade unions in the course of the nineteenth century had led to growth of a layer of full time union functionaries who were markedly different from the members of the union they represented both in social position and in psychology. As the Webbs put it:

> The actual government of the Trade Union World rests exclusively in the hands of a class apart, the salaried officers of the great societies....
>
> The salaried official of a great trade union occupies a unique position. He belongs neither to the middle nor the working class...
>
> The promotion of a working man to the position of a salaried brain worker effects a complete and sudden change in his manner of life. Instead of working every day at a given task,he suddenly finds himself the master of his own time, with duties which, though laborious enough, are indefinite, irregular, and easily neglected.(Webb, 1920: 466-67)

The Webbs went on to quote at length from the account of an artisan engineer as to the nature of the social transformation which followed upon the position of full-time official. It was, of course, considerations of this order which led Michels to formulate his pessimistic conclusions as to the impossibility of democratic control in working class organisations and, while that view is clearly a grotesque overstatement of the real historical development it is clear that the tendency he located is one that is markedly present today. (For a brief overview of the arguments, see Hyman,1973.)

While it is hardly likely that anyone would challenge the existence and influence of this 'class apart', there is substantial debate as to the nature and significance of this fact. The most influential position is probably that associated with the Communist Party in the thirty-odd years after 1945 and, since its effective collapse, with those 'Broad Lefts' influenced by the supporters of *Militant* . While much of the formal argumentation for this position, and the most clear and coherent organisational results, come from this sector of the political spectrum, it is important to remember that in practice it is a view shared by those to the right of this position.This position argues that the key issue of trade union policy is not that there is such a division between full time officers and members but that of which political

line is supported by the officers. The other major position, associated with the Communist Party in its earliest years and today with the Socialist Workers' Party, argues that the full-time officials constitute a layer with interests different and distinct from the lay members: they are, in effect, a bureaucracy.

Clearly, a paper such as this neither can nor should attempt to argue the relative merits of each position, however these considerations do have crucial relevance for issues of video. In the first place, many arguments for the importance of trade union video begin from the claim that there is a wide divergence of views between the officials and the members which video production can help to overcome. Thus Barry Sherman, a leading figure in the production of trade union videos, recently began an article on the more general question of trade union communications with the following observation:

> The most significant victory that the trade union movement has had in the past six years has been the overwhelming vote to continue the political funds in all the unions which have balloted. Although this may not reflect a massive shift in fundamental political sentiment, or even electoral prospects, it has broken the mould of union members ignoring the requests, orders, indeed statements made to them, or on their behalf, by their unions. (Sherman, 1986)

The second way in which this division concerns us is in terms of the definition of what constitutes a 'trade union video'. Those writings which lie within the tradition which sees officialdom as relatively unproblematic will tend to define trade union video and the problems associated with it with those videos directly commissioned or used by the official bodies of the unions. The tradition which stresses the bureaucratic nature of the trade union officials and sees their interests as different to those of the rank-and-file will certainly define trade union video much more widely. In this paper I propose to adopt the broader definition since that allows the peculiar problems encountered by the official video to be

placed in perspective and, incidentally, allows us to discuss a number of videos which we would be obliged otherwise to ignore, most notably the famous *Miners' Campaign Tapes*.

It is also the case that, for our purposes, the narrow definition gives us little purchase on our subject. It must follow from a position which argues that the political complexion of the union officials is a decisive question that differences in politics lead to different forms of activity. In the field of trade union video this does not seem to be the case. While it is true that the extreme right of the movement, as represented by the EEPTU, does have a distinctive position, this is not generalised amongst all such unions. The EEPTU has devoted considerable resources to the training of its members in job-oriented skills, enjoys a high reputation amongst employers for this work, and uses video, indeed video-disc, extensively in such courses. At the time of writing it seems that another large right-wing union, the AUEW, is about to follow this lead. On the other hand, the UCW is undoubtedly a right-wing union but it has a highly developed video programme, using various kinds of material, aimed at the more general social and political life of its membership, which is often characterised by considerable formal innovation. This enthusiasm for video is not, however, a right-wing monopoly since NUPE, usually reckoned a left-wing union, is deeply involved in developing this work.

The fact that attitudes to trade union video, either for or against, cannot be correlated in any serious way with the political line of particular unions is not, of course, conclusive proof of the falsity of the view which stresses the political line of the officials. It might easily be argued that the area of video is not one in which such a theory applies since it is peripheral to, say, the central concerns of the union, in which the differentiation <u>is</u> significant. What the evidence does show is that this definition of the problem is of little or no use to us in this investigation and I shall therefor pursue the other, broader perspective. As we shall see, a stress upon the divergence between the position of the union bureaucracy and that of the rank-and-file helps us to illuminate and understand a number of important

aspects of the problem, in particular those concerned with issues of control and distribution, as well as the relationship between the unions' 'commissioning editors' and the video-makers.

The Origins and Extent of Trade Union Video

It is possible to argue that trade union video forms the largest single area of contemporary radical video practice. A recent report found that there were then in circulation some 51 titles in the category of 'Labour Movement', as compared with 39 in 'Social Welfare', 27 in 'Women's Issues' and 21 in 'Youth'. Not only were there more of these videos in existence but they were also more likely to be widely distributed than any others. The average sale per title for those in the category 'Labour Movement' was 31 tapes. The next highest was 'Youth' with 30. Of the other categories mentioned above 'Social Welfare' sold an average of 4 and 'Women's Issues' 2 (Dovey and Dungey, 1985:Table One). Sales is not the same measure as audience size, so it is difficult to tell from these figures the extent to which the heavy dominance of labour movement titles was in fact reproduced in the number of people seeing them. It does, however, seem probable that the much-maligned market does in this instance reflect something about demand for these videos. On the other hand, it is important to remember that while these numbers may seem fairly large, they form a very small part of the total of video productions. More narrowly, the trade unions and associated labour movement bodies command much less funding than their employers and have spent very much less on video production.

There are a number of ways in which this relatively large number of productions can be analysed but it is particularly helpful in understanding the wyas in which trade union video has developed to look at the different sources from which trade unions have obtained videos.

There are three possible sources for trade union videos. The first, generation by another organisation for another purpose, for example broadcast programmes either taped (illegally) off

air by individual members of the union or purchased by the union for showing to their members, is relatively unproblematic from the point of view of relations inside the union and between the union and the producers. However, the fact that a great deal of the material is in fact generated by broadcasting organisations does have important consequences. 'Broadcast quality' is undoubtedly one of the most fetishized terms in the world of video but it does relate to the central question of cost. Many trade union officials will refer to the fact that their members' views on what constitutes an acceptable standard of production are formed by the prevailing, very expensive, standards of broadcast television. The purchase of such material by the union for their own use is, it is argued by, for example, Reagan Scott (TGWU National Secretary for Research and Education), an important and cost effective part of the training work of the TGWU. It also sets the standards by which the union's own video productions should be judged and thus ensures that any decision to use such techniques will have to be taken at the highest levels of the union: in the case of the TGWU, by Reagan Scott. This argument as to the membership's rejection of work that does not reproduce at least an approximation to broadcast standard is used very frequently, both by union officials and by programme producers, in a number of contexts. The sense in which it allows an apparently neutral justification for the retention of an important avenue of communication in the hands of the union officials is the one that concerns us here, but this point will also recur in discussions of appropriate aesthetic strategies.

The second source of trade union videos is from work generated independently of the union structures, say by a video workshop, but directed specifically at trade union members. Sometimes, as with the *The Miners' Campaign Tapes* these may be taken up by the officials of the union or unions in question but in other instances they may simply find an audience through unofficial networks in the unions. This source is important for those groups of video producers who wish to address union members in ways independent of some of the particular problems encountered in work with full-time officials and we will have to return to it later.

The third source is those videos directly produced as a result of commissions and funding from the unions. It is around these that the central arguments about control and distribution are most often focussed. This is a relatively recent development in Britain, although it has a longer and richer history in the USA (Peers and Richards, 1986). In Britain, the major development has been since 1984 although there are instances, for example the IRSF, of unions using videos before this.

The reason for this recent and somewhat rapid shift is the matter of some debate. One view, held by some producers in the field, for example Birmingham Trade Union Resources Centre (TURC, 1985) and Joel Cayford of Team Video (Cayford, 1985) is that the development of trade union video is a direct and necessary response to the increasing use of video by management. As Cayford puts it:

> Management have exploited gaps in trade union communication links by talking directly to the workforce in order to change their attitudes....
>
> These initiatives are often part of 'company communications' or 'employee communications' strategies, where management ignore or replace trade union lines of communication in order to be able to directly influence the workforce. The grapevine is seen as a grassroots hotline which co-exists between trade union and management messages. One of the management's aims is to influence the grapevine so it lends credibility to the management line. It is in this context that management have made effective use of video and other communications techniques. (Cayford: 5-6)

While it is undoubtedly true that management do attempt this kind of intervention in union opinion formation, and true also that they are prepared to devote relatively substantial resources to using video in this process, there is substantial evidence which suggests that this is not the motivation for increasing trade union use of video. In the first place, I have not been able to find

one single instance in which a trade union has produced a video in order to counter one from the management. Secondly, the majority of those videos which I have seen have been devoted to more general campaigning questions across the membership rather than being focussed on the action of one particular management, although this may simply reflect the fact that my research to date has involved a greater degree of attention to public sector unions which tend to confront fewer employers. Thirdly, the evidence of a development of video as a response to an initiative by the 'other side' which I do have, and it is admittedly limited to the Inland Revenue and the Civil Service Commissioners, is that of management responding to a prior use of video by the union. For instance, Tony Christopher (General Secretary of the IRSF) used the possibility of a future use of video by the Inland Revenue to argue, unsuccesfully, for an enormous extension of his union's already existing video activities (IRSF, 1984. The conference rejected his view on the grounds of cost.)

If the view that trade union videos *are* a response to management initiatives is wrong, the view that they *should* be, which is the other possible interpretation of the Cayford passage, seems even more mistaken. In the first place such a strategy would surrender the initiative for areas of discussion to the management as a matter of principle. There is already a severe structural imbalance in terms of the ability to define a framework of debate built into the capital-labour relation without the labour side of things adopting that imbalance as a determinant beyond which it will not go. More importantly and concretely, managements deploy vastly more resources than unions and it is an idle dream to hope to be able to match them: taken seriously the 'response strategy would require unions to gear themselves, financially and organisationally, to a very high level of production efficiency, one tied both to the normal timetable of collective bargaining and to the exigencies of industrial life, over, in the case of unions involved in the private sector, a large number of employers. It is difficult to see how one can justify the sort of resources that would be needed to produce *Panorama* from Peckham Road.

The alternative explanation for the timing and nature of the union move into video is that it is a response to a more general crisis of trade unionism. This is the view held by, for example, Beryl Richards of Smith-Bundy Video, another major supplier of trade union videos. She argues that on the one hand the period since the early 1970's has seen a retreat by the trade unions, with problems of falling membership, ineffective organisation and state-orchestrated public hostility to their aims. On the other hand there has been a increasing awareness by union officers of their relations with the media and the possibilities of new and cheaper media technologies. This has led to the increasing use of video as a positive weapon in the attempt to alter the situation.

This explanation seems much more convincing. Much of the work that has been done so far by and for trade unions has been concerned with general problems facing the unions and has been designed to achieve support for union-initiated campaigns. These, of course, do not exist in a vacuum but are responses to real difficulties, usually ones created by the employers and the state, but the terms of debate have in general been set by the unions. An example of this is the campaign to win ballots for the political levy which has been an important feature of trade union life over the last twelve months. This was a problem set for the unions by the government and the terms of the debate were set, in general terms, by the government and the media, but the union leaderships had substantial freedom both in the timing of the votes and in the precise character of the debates. There was considerable use of video in the various campaigns. The TUC's own Trade Union Co-ordinating Committee made two videos of its own for general distribution, *Say Yes to a Voice* and *A Question of Democracy* . Some individual unions produced their own videos for the campaign, of which the IRSF's *Business as Usual?* is the best-known example. Overall the campaign was a massive success with all the unions which balloted producing substantial votes in favour of retaining political funds. Some, for example the IRSF, showed massive and, to the outsider, quite unexpected majorities in favour.

From the point of view of the commissioning

organisations. none of the officers I interviewed advanced the view that their move into video was the result of a need to respond to management use of video. All of them located their union's work as the result of long-term developments in the needs of the union, often identified as the result of extensive research and debate.

To take an example of this, the SCPS has over recent years suffered membership loss, partly as a result of cuts in civil service numbers and partly as a result of an inability to recruit new entrants to their grades. As a response to these difficulties the union commissioned a review of all aspects of the life of the union from the Department of Sociology at the University of Warwick (Drake *et. al.*,1982). Following from this the union's Finance and Organisation Committee began discussion of the problem of recruitment and in September 1984 approved a paper from Leslie Manasseh which argued the case for a video production aimed primarily at recruitment. One of the many interesting aspects of this document, and one which tends to confirm Richards' view that the increasing 'media awareness' of trade unionists is an important element in the move towards video, is that the paper argues its case very much in terms of the political nature of representation:

> The government has succeeded in constructing and sustaining an image of trade unions as inimical to the national interest and to the interests of individual workers....
>
> The problem we face is not one of rational opposition, but rather of hostility and apathy based upon mistaken perceptions and prejudices about trade unions. <u>As such the issue is one of presentation and communication</u>....we need to recapture the ground that has been taken from us and rebuild a positive, constructive image of the Society.
>
> It is in this context that we should consider using video.(Manasseh, 1984:1-3. Original emphasis. In fairness I should point out that the paper goes on to discuss management use of video, albeit

in general terms.)

It seems, then, on balance, that factors derived from the general economic and social climate are most important in prompting unions to become involved in video production and that the majority of videos so far produced address general issues rather than particular situations.

The Functions of Trade Union Video

Discussions of this order tend inevitably to spill over into questions of function, and it is to these that we must now turn. With the single exception of the TGWU's recent *Advertisement* , which was produced and broadcast without even the degree of research which would go into the construction of a normal commercial advertisement, trade union videos are made with a very precise concern to audience and function. This factor, a sharp contrast to the notion of the imputed aggregate viewer that dominates broadcast production and the perhaps rather cavalier attitude to audience which has often characterised *avant garde* work, is one of the factors which make this work of potential interest to those whose concern with trade unions might otherwise be somewhat limited.

The most obvious function of trade union videos lies in the field of campaigning. We have already looked very briefly at the political fund campaign and it is indeed the case that the IRSF video, for example, was constructed after minute research into the nature of the problems facing IRSF members and into the nature of that membership itself. Three things stand out about *Business as Usual?* . In the first place it was produced according to an aesthetic which stresses the importance of using 'ordinary members' to put the case. As Joel Cayford argues it:

> In a trade union the most effective leaflets, broadsheets and journals are ones which articulate what members are feeling. It is the members who are in touch with the problems. It is the members who know what is happening....
>
> ...those trade unionists with experiences

> to share should be able to communicate widely with other members so their debate can be reflected and carried forward on paper, on video and in meetings. (Cayford:21-2)

In line with this view, the argument of *Business as Usual?* is entirely carried by rank-and-file members of the union.

Despite echoes, no doubt conscious, of *The Ontology of the Photographic Image* in some of the arguments put forward by the video-makers, it would be a mistake to believe that this style of work guarantees the authenticity and truth of the work. The second distinctive feature of this video, which cuts across all of the intention to allow the ordinary member to speak, is the desire and the need to select speakers who put the 'right' case in the 'right' way: these definitions are, of course, provided by the union leadership and, to a lesser extent, by the video-makers. In this instance, there was a desire to reflect the membership of the IRSF, and ,in line with that the speakers are largely female. The care in selecting images and arguments which fit the union leadership's knowledge of, or at least beliefs about, the membership is an central feature of this kind of work.

The third distinctive aspect of the video is the way in which it was shown. *Business as Usual?* was very much part of a campaign and it was linked in to the other aspects of the campaign very closely. Thus the first showing of the video was as part of a conference of those union activists who would have to carry the arguments in the work-place. Only when it had been 'test shown' and seen to be valuable was it put on 'general release'. When it went out it was accompanied with a folder containing seven items: four of these were 'Briefing Notes' explaining the arguments about the campaign, the mechanics of organising a showing, advice on how to lead a discussion after the showing, and the background to the video; two other items were publicity, being a poster for the meeting and a leaflet summarising the union's case; the final item was an expenses form (IRSF,1985).

This extremely impressive documentary support is

certainly unusually well developed for trade union video but it is indicative of the general trend. Thus the SCPS video referred to above, *Membership Matters* , comes with a booklet giving the case histories that appear in the video in rather more detail. The reason for this is that it is generally thought that the function of a video tape, at least in a campaign context, is to act as a stimulus for discussion and that the participants need additional material in order to make such an activity worthwhile. Trade Union videos are, as Roger Kline of TURC put it, 'trigger tapes' that are designed to link into other activities.

The final point which the IRSF tape illustrates is that of exhibition. The majority of campaign tapes aimed at union members find difficulty in reaching their audience. Despite some efforts to develop a network through the homes of members, either individually or via the collective 'Tupperware party' model most often advanced by the UCW, the workplace is the favoured site of exhibition. The first tape produced by the IRSF was welcomed into the workplace by management, perhaps because it argued the case for the acceptance of new technology. With the political fund campaign, however, the management adopted a position of extreme hostility, even attempting to prevent the actual ballot taking place in the offices and refusing to allow either rooms or equipment to be used for showing the video. Jim McAuslan (IRSF Education, Training and Campaigns Officer) estimates that because of this pressure only some 40 to 45 per cent of the union's membership got to see the video during the campaign. He therefore tends to the view that while the video was important in the campaign it was not vital, and is accordingly slightly sceptical of of the more messianic claims made for the efficacy of video.

A second major function of trade union video is the training and education of the members. As mentioned previously, some unions use video for the training of their members in work-skills. This raises a different order of questions and I will not be discussing it here. More normal is the use of video in the training of members in union proceedures, their general education and in informing them about the services the union provides for its members. Here the problems of viewing do not take so sharp a

form since the majority of such education will take place in an educational enviroment, usually well-provided with audio-visual aids and free from management harrassment. Such videos tend to be even more tightly tied not only to a conception of their intended audience but also to a precise curriculum of union training. This is less marked with the use of externally generated videos, which probably form the majority of such material together with the unquantifiable and ephemeral tapes made to teach union members the wiles of television performance, but is very marked with those produced specifically for the purpose.

Thus the CPSA's *What's My Line?* ,a parody of the TV show of that name, is designed to be used in training branch officials in their responsibilities and Jane Hustwit (CPSA National Organiser) is most reluctant to allow the video to be viewed outside of that context. Her view is that without contextualisation the grotesque parody of a certain type of female TV panel-game performer, designed to contrast with the very different image of the union official and thus to provoke discussion about sexism, can be, and indeed has been, interpreted as itself sexism.

The video is based on the panel show itself, with various recognisable 'types' attempting to guess that the contestant is a union official. Their mistaken guesses provide the starting-point for departures into a subjective discourse in which the official imagines how well or badly the ascribed role fits her actual situation. The tape is designed to be interrupted a number of times to allow a small group discussion of the various points the drama raises. (It is also very funny.)

This type of work cannot be assimilated into the essentially documentary aesthetic we discussed above and it raises the question of how far the trade union officials who commission these videos are bound by aesthetic conservatism. The answer, in my view, is that they are ready to experiment with a number of forms. The CPSA, again, quite happily combines cartoons with talking heads in *It's About Time* , intended to stimulate women's involvment in the union, as does the NUJ recruitment video *Journalists' Union* and the NALGO-sponsored *Rights? Wot Rights?* and *Rights Not Wrongs* , aimed at

interesting young people on government training schemes in trade unions .

These last-mentioned tapes, aimed at recruiting non-members into unions, raise the third major area of trade unions videos: those concerned to present the union to outsiders. Here many of the same considerations apply, particularly with regard to audiences. Thus the Rail Federation group of unions produced a video *The Case For Rail* which was aimed at 'opinion leaders' (MP's, businessmen and such like), which adopts a very authoritative tone and uses all of the tricks of broadcast TV to disguise advocacy as reporting. A different approach was adopted by NALGO in their 1983 campaign against cuts and privatisation: they commissioned three videos re-working basically the same material but aimed at different audiences. One was aimed at union members, one at public-sector decision makers and one at the general public; all were titled *Put People First* . According to NALGO's own assessment, the attempt did not work perfectly and the video addressed to the general public needed to be radically different in form: 'It needed to be more of a "commercial" for the public services (and incidentally for NALGO)' (NALGO,n.d.[1984 ?]:16).

Another example of this careful tailoring comes from the above mentioned tapes aimed at recruiting young people. According to Dave Rushton of TU/TV, another programme provider in the field, the choice of cartoons and cartoonist for these videos was based on the reasoning that the best place to reach the target audience was when they were having their statutory educational sessions. Thus teachers were the key 'gatekeepers' in deciding whether to show the videos. Teachers read *The Guardian* , therefore use Steve Bell for the animation.

Overall, then, it seems that trade union videos are marked by a variety of styles from the most orthodox TV presentations through to quite innovative mixtures of forms. These aesthetic choices are not undertaken blindly or through prejudice but through a very close and detailed attention to the target audiences.

Reaching these audiences, however, is more of a problem. While the use of video in union organised training is relatively unproblematic, other

enviroments have grave problems. There is a general sense among the trade unionists I have spoken to that the workplace is the ideal site for collectively viewing videos, but any such activity is naturally dependent upon management consent. This might be given on three grounds: generosity, which is hardly a reliable basis for organisation in the present climate; union strength in the workplace, which does not seem to be very widespread at the present moment; management agreement to the message of the video, which seems to limit the purpose and potential of the video unduly. It is therefore unlikely that it will be easy to integrate videos into regular workplace life. On the other hand, videos associated with specific campaigns, in which special meetings are organised which command higher than the normal attendence, can command a larger audience. The alternative to this sort of collective viewing is the establishment of the sort of distribution network which can reach members at home. While this might be possible it would transform the nature of the video from a tape designed to trigger discussion .to one designed to be received in the same conditions as any other form of TV.

Tensions and Alternatives

So far we have assumed that the question of producing trade union videos is a relatively unproblematic activity in which an active commissioner in the trade union leadership issues unproblematic instructions to video producers to generate a message which will go from 'the union' to its members. This is certainly the tone of much of the writing and thinking about the field. It marks the Sherman piece cited above (Sherman was a trade union official with ASTMS for many years), and it is undoudtedly one of the attractions of video that it bears very strong marks of being one-way communication. The commissioner, whoever controls the funds, decides what will be said and how it will be said and there is not even the last sad recourse of the union activist, the letters page of the union journal, to answer back with. From this perspective one can see how it enables the union leadership to concentrate message-generation even more firmly in their own hands and

ensure that it reaches the target audience unmediated by the views of the lay activists. Writing of trade union journals, a recent scholarly study nicely caught the attitude of the union official:

> In the ideal situation the fullest exchange of information at all levels within a trade union is desirable. Members should be able to easily inform themselves of the activities of the leadership through the publication of full reports and informative minutes of executive decisions. In many unions the circulation of such reports is more than adequate and interested members are reasonably well informed as to what is going on.
>
> But what about the bulk of members who are largely inactive? It would be very difficult to say how effective the formal communication channels are below branch level. However, Sarah Monk's study of the TGWU's communications in Coventry (1969) points to severe deficiencies from the point of view of the union's leadership. She concluded that these deficiencies had led to the development of a largely informal parallel system provided by the shop floor representatives. The circumstances strongly suggest that such a situation exists in most unions, especially those organising workers in several industries, scattered throughout the country. While they are probably more effective they cannot guarantee the factual or accurate transmission of ideas and information emanating from union headquarters.
>
> The other major source of union information mentioned by members - trade union journals - offers national union headquarters a far more direct communication channel with its rank and file. They thus represent a more reliable means by which national union policies, ideas, information and concerns can be transmitted without interpretation or

> misunderstanding by intermediaries. (Rice, 1984:33)

We return here to the notion of their being a division between the bureaucracy and the rank-and-file. In the view of the bureaucracy, it is important to retain control of message generation and transmission. What little writing there is about trade union communications usually assumes this as an unquestioned given but one of the few studies to give it any critical attention found that very few editors of union journals were elected to their posts. The difference between appointment and election seemed to make a significant difference in the way in which these editors viewed their primary responsibility: the norm was to the other officials and the General Secretary in particular (Grace, 1985).

There is therefore room for tension between the bureaucracy, which wishes to retain control of communications in its own hands and the activists who have traditionally played a role in this area and who might wish to use it to generate alternative messages. The only case of that potential conflict finding formal expression that I know of is the above mentioned conference decision by the IRSF, but since such conflicts are commonplace in other aspects of union life there is every reason to suppose that they are likely to occur frequently here, too.

Informal conflict poses different problems. There is a considerable awareness amongst the union officials to whom I have spoken of the dangers of members grumbling about this use of union funds, but such an activity is unlikely to lead to any serious alternatives. Much more organised has been the attempt by activists to find alternatives to the official videos generated by the unions.

My research has only uncovered one 'do-it-yourself' attempt to generate alternative or supplementary messages entirely from within a trade union: that at Camden NALGO (where else?). Here Kate Lord, the NALGO Branch Education Officer, had previous experience of using off-air recordings to stimulate interest in section meetings and has attempted to set up a small-scale, VHS-based, video production unit financed from her Branch budget. The eight

union members involved (five female, three male) all described themselves, very vociferously, as union activists. One of them had prior experience of video production, having worked in that area for Camden Social Services. They were attempting to put together a local newsreel at the time of writing, using both national events (the Wapping dispute, the local elections) and more local issues like local Health and Saftey matters. This fascinating and impressive effort is very much in its early days and it is difficult to say whether it will prosper. Already Jerry Rothwell, the member with experience of video-production, was concerned about questions of quality with VHS work. It will be interesting see how far this problem can be solved.

The Camden circumstances, however, seem unusual. Much more common are attempts by trade union activists to work with outside video producers to generate oppositional messages, and it is at this point that questions of relations between video providers and unions become crucial. We have, so far, assumed that the providers of videos are a homogenous group. In so far as they are all working for union, this is true, but in fact there are very wide diveregences of background, philosophy, style and almost everything else between them.

The least problematic relations are probably those between the effectively commerical companies and the union leaders. Union commissions are treated by organisations like Diverse Developments as a client in the same way as any other client. Decisions as to production style etc. are taken upon strictly professional lines: thus the decision to use a female production team and Ann Mitchell as presenter in *Time For Justice* was based on the belief that this was the best way to reach the Health Service ancillary workers at whom it was aimed. According to Richard Bunning, Diverse use TV conventions because they are familiar and the status of a trade union video is 'the same as the signed reports on *Diverse*' . The crucial decisions about the content of the video come from the commissioners.

Rather more diversity is to be found amongst those commerical companies who work specifically for the Labour Movement and kindred bodies. They argue that a company that works for managers one day and for

unions the next cannot hope to do justice to either. However, while some of the companies, like Team, have strongly-held aesthetic views, they are even more financially dependent upon continuing commissions than are the first group and therefore are unable to do more than offer 'professional criticisms' of the ideas that are presented to them. They do claim, however, to be able to stop the General Secretary talking to camera for twenty minutes.

The third group are those organisations whose strategy involves attempts to avoid the relatively tight grasp of the bureaucracy. It was of relations with this group that Chris Cossey, Head of Press and Publicity for NALGO, said; 'There will always be tensions but it is important that the client's will prevails'.

The most dramatic instance of this will prevailing occurred in a relation between the TGWU and Forum TV of Bristol. The TGWU commission Forum to make a short recruitment tape aimed at young people. The resulting tape mixed a staged drama with interviews with young TGWU members. The TGWU, or rather Reagan Scott, objected most strongly to the tape, *No Experience Needed* . He insisted on re-editing and a the shooting of additional material and the resulting tape is known as *Day One* . Apart from being five minutes shorter, the shop steward has disappeared from the dramatic sections as has one key reference to her role. According to Reagan Scott, this was because these sections were objectionable. However that may be, the result has been to remove all reference to the union defending its members from arbitrary management practices, or in any way being concerned with conflict, from the release version. According to Scott: 'The workshop people do not have an adequate understanding of the needs of their clients.'

Most clashes seem to have been rather less dramatic than this: distribution difficulties for un-favoured tapes is one mechanism of disapproval. However, there is sufficient awareness of these problems amongst independent producers to make some of them search for alternatives. It is at this point that arguments about 'broadcast quality' become of crucial importance since to produce tapes which in any way approach such standards one

requires very substantial funding and this means either union officials or some form of subsidy from elsewhere. The more rigidly one adheres to these standards, the more squarely one confronts the dilemma. So, for example, Dave Rushton is a strong advocate of broadcast quality, arguing: 'By using broadcast quality for our programmes, we immediately gain access to television as a possible extra means of distribution'(Swain, 1986:39). In practice this has meant attempts to find ways of gaining finance from Channel Four or working with lower levels of the bureaucracy. Thus *Wapping Lies* was financed by the Campaign for Press and Broadcasting Freedom, effectively the creature of lower levels of the print union bureaucracy. The result does not seem to be an increased freedom to comment: the video simply reproduces the line of the national officials and makes no suggestions as to how the dispute might be advanced.

Another strategy, best developed by Trade Films in the North East, is to attempt to try to carry some of the fixed costs of video production on a diversified production base while gaining some extra financial support from regional trade union organisations, who in return get a voice in editorial control. This is a strategy which is closely related to arguments about regional film culture which we cannot pursue here, but from the point of view of purely trade union videos it is unfortunately difficult to see it as viable.

There are two related questions here. The chosen form is suggested by the title:*Northern Newsreels*. This type of production is determined by the frequency of its appearence: in this instance quarterly. Such an interval has meant that the agitational emphasis, reporting events and giving telephone numbers for action in support of trade union and related struggles, has had to be dropped. The first two pilots appeared after many of the events they advertised were over. The first full-scale effort is thus much more removed from immediacy, dealing with less 'newsy' material like oral history of the working class movement and containing a dramatised critique of TV news reporting. The items are fewer and longer than in earlier tapes and there is only one address or telephone number, that of the Labour Party in

Walworth Road, in connection with *Red Wedge* . While one can see substantial reasons on the grounds of regional cultural policy for trade unions supporting this venture, it is difficult to see how it has in fact opened a space for work that the unions would be otherwise unprepared to support.

We may note in passing that the idea of a newsreel has been quite widely canvassed in the movement. The IRSF rejected such a proposal from the consultants EPIC (see EPIC, 1983:7.4. IRSF, n.d.[1984]:16), and very recently the BFI Production Board refused funding for a project from Films at Work to be based in East London.

The second problem arises directly out of the financial demands of the form. A more regular bulletin would require larger sums of money, certainly more than local unions could generate and thus lead once again back into the arms of the very national bureaucracy that the scheme tries to avoid. Again, even with cross-subsidies, the sums of money involved are not those generally available to rank-and-file activists. In fact, the money that has been raised has come from local officials, and it is by no means evident that these people are qualitatively more open to funding different and potentially uncontrollable messages than their national brothers and sisters. Indeed, in both of the cases, NALGO and NUPE, where money has been provided this has been with the agreement of the national officials and in the two key cases where it has not been forthcoming, the TGWU and the GMBATU, this has been the result of action by national officials. Amber, the other large workshop in the area, withdrew from joint discussions of this project at an early stage precisely for the reason that it would be controlled by the local bureaucracy, although it must be said that it is not at all clear that their own project for working with shop stewards' committees to produce local campaign tapes can develop as a viable alternative either. It does not seem that there is any simple and regular way of making trade union videos which avoids the desire of the bureaucracy to control what goes on. This control is much more likely to be over questions of political content than over formal innovation: the CPSA video *What's My Line* is remarkable both for its formal innovation and for the fact that it seeks to train

union officials without once mentioning management. Des Freedman of Films at Work argues that: 'If you retain editorial and political control you are unlikely to get funding from trade union officials'.

This rather pessimistic conclusion needs some qualification. In the first place the bureaucracy often need to rely on the activists to achieve certain ends and this is sometimes reflected in the production of videos. For example, it is very often the rank and file who get to speak in that style of video production that relies on people involved with the issues to expound them. Secondly there has been, and may still be, a certain amount of funding which does permit different perspectives. Thus John Dovey's *Lo Pay Ho Way* , funded by the GLC, is aimed at young, largely black workers in fast food chains with a view to encouraging trade union membership.

Thirdly, and most importantly, all of the above limitations and qualifications are based upon what we might term 'normal' class-relations. They reflect the reality that for long periods the bureaucrats' image of themselves as the active force and the members as passive consumers does bear some relationship to the reality of trade union life. It is not, however, the whole of the truth. There are periods in which the membership are active, large scale strikes for instance, and in which the officials play a much more passive role. In those circumstances the gap between bureaucracy and rank-and-file is most acute, and they are also periods in which the function of trade union video is potentially very different.

The outstanding example of this in the recent past was the miners' strike. The Northern Film and Television Archive's Catalogue of videos produced during this dispute lists some 39 different tapes on different questions (NFTVA, forthcoming). These were generated in a variety of different ways, from broadcast commissions to political parties.

The best known tapes of the period, *The Miners' Campaign Videotapes* , was the result of a remarkable level of collaboration and initiative amongst radical film and video makers. As the NFVTA Catalogue puts it:

> Programmes were planned collectively; material was shot by different groups within their own region then edited centrally; finally the finished programmes were sent back to the regional organisations for distribution. The Project was financed by donations of money, free publicity and free labour, together with income from distribution of finished tapes, with any surplus going to the NUM Hardship Fund. This initiative represented a collective project of independent film-makers working with labour movement organisations on an unprecedented scale. Some thousands of copies of the programmes were distributed in videocassette form.(NFTVA:6)

Clearly, this level of sacrifice and mobilisation can no more be the norm of life in a capitalist society than could the miners' strike itself. However, it does demonstrate another method of working and one which, while it was taken up by at least some of the NUM area leaderships, originated from the concerns of video makers and the demands of rank-and-file miners. It also demonstrated a quite different kind of distribution network: trade unionists engaged in a struggle of that magnitude were very keen to use video and quite able to find ways of getting tapes into the hands of thousands of people. It is also important that the question of quality was much less important here than it would seem either from the claims of the union officials or some producers. It was not that the tapes themselves were not of a high quality: they were. Rather, copies of VHS copies were circulated and viewed avidly despite the poor quality such reproductions involve. An audience is prepapred to put up with quite considerable sacrifices of quality if the material is what they find it important to watch.

Excellent though the work produced in this period was, it is important to subject it to just the same degree of critical scrutiny as the rest of the material we have reviewed. I would suggest that the bulk of this material was concerned to counter the dominant presentations of the miners' strike and to celebrate what was a genuinely remarkable and , in my view, heroic working class experience. We

cannot, however, escape from the fact that it was a heroic defeat and therefore requires not only celebration but analysis. Some of the material produced during the dispute, notably *Learning on the Line* did attempt this task but much did not.

There is, I think, an important reason for this: rank-and-file union activists and independent video makers habitually occupy different places on the social spectrum. Outside of periods of crisis, or purely professional links, there is little chance of a serious interchange between the two groups. The result is that when the two groups are thrown together by a crisis they lack the mutual confidence and knowledge which makes for an easy interchange of criticisms. Those forms of organisation which do permit such an interchange are primarily political parties and it seems to me that membership of such a party is the final condition for constructing a trade union video that will be both independent of the bureaucracy and able to clarify the way to win a dispute.

Conclusion

Trade union video is clearly a large and expanding area of non-broadcast video video work. It has largely been developed by trade union leaderships as a response to general political problems they have faced in the last decade. Contrary to some popular accounts, these trade union officials are not mindless and conservative philistines. They have a very precise sense of the needs of their members and are prepared to experiment with different formal solutions to problems of communication. However, at all times they have a strong interest in controlling the content of the material produced. Distribution of material other than that desinged for educational use poses very severe problems and it seems that the use of tapes as part of general campaigns has been the most effective method.

Conflicts of interest within the union, and between the union leaderships and video makers have led some trade unionists to look for alternative forms of practice. In normal circumstances most of the

avenues tried are fraught with their own difficulties.

In some circumstances, notably those of working class mobilisation it is possible to develop forms of practice which go beyond the limits laid down by the officials. Even this, however, does not resolve all of the problems. If one reflects upon the siutation in the miners' strike, or of Wapping at the time of writing, it is obvious that it is not simply a question of providing channels for the rank-and-file to express themselves, to celebrate their experience, valuable though that is. The other function, surely, of any trade union video should be to help win a dispute. In that sense video workers who wish to be independent of the restrictions placed upon them by the bureaucracy need not only financial and organisational space but political space as well.

Note

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